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Understanding Dumb Shows and Interpreting *The White Devil*

In the middle of a rant about bad theatre, Hamlet sneers at ‘the Groundlings: who (for the most part) are capeable of nothing, but inexplicable dumbe shewes, & noise’ (oo5v).<sup>1</sup> This complaint reveals some of the pleasures and problems associated with dumb shows. They are fodder for spectators whose interpretive ‘capabilities’ stretch only as far as spectacle. Hamlet sets shows against language: Claudius Hollybrand’s *A Dictionarie French and English* (1593) defines ‘inexplicable’ as that ‘*which cannot be expressed, expounded or made plaine with words*’ ([R5r]); thus dumb shows are beyond the reach of language both in their action and their meaning. Small wonder the soliloquizing Prince is not keen. They are equivalent to non-verbal ‘noise’. Indeed, Hamlet’s description marks dumb shows as somehow resistant to understanding itself: ‘inexplicable’, they are ‘inscrutable, unintelligible’ (*OED*). Yet as with most of Hamlet’s pronouncements on theatricality, his dismissal of dumb shows is not as absolute or clear-cut as it first seems, either in relation to his own play or Renaissance drama more broadly. After all, Hamlet himself commissions a dumb show within *The Murder of Gonzago*. Furthermore, his accusation of inexplicability sits uneasily on a form that claims to ‘show’ narrative, action, and meaning. Dumb shows appear in Renaissance drama from the 1560s and survive into the seventeenth century (see Mehl 1965). They take the form of actions mimed by actors who might otherwise be expected to speak (Pearn 1935: 385). Condensing unwieldy plot or providing an allegorical gloss on the main narrative, they communicate units of meaning. But the fact that they are almost always accompanied by expository dialogue in the scene that follows, or a presenter’s formal explanation, belies the illustrative purpose of the show itself.

This chapter explores the contradictory function of dumb shows, which is both to reveal significance and to make it more difficult to access. Since dumb shows produce meaning in a different register from dialogue, they are at one level literally inexplicable: their full impact is not

‘made plaine with words’. Understanding dumb shows is not only a matter of interpreting a gesture as a representation of a particular action or plot development, but also responding emotionally and viscerally to their spectacle and ‘noise’. In this respect, dumb shows further multiply the responses demanded by theatrical performance more broadly, and therefore provide a crucial insight into the experience of theatricality itself. Such diversity is one of the issues this volume seeks to open out: what various modes of attention are required of theatrical spectators? By focusing on stage directions, we gain a clearer sense of the texture of the plays in which they appear; plays where actors do many things other than speak words. In this chapter, I analyse how these dumb-show stage directions intervene in the meaning-making process. Elsewhere in this collection, Tiffany Stern argues that dumb shows – a distinctive form of the jumbled ‘stage direction’ category – are ‘mini-genres in their own rights’ and often composed by someone other than the play’s main author(s). This chapter takes a theatrical perspective on dumb shows’ potentially disjunctive relationship with their plays. Considering a range of different dumb shows, I suggest ways in which this form shapes an audience’s understanding of dramatic performance: how dumb shows both help spectators orient themselves relative to the play’s fictional dimensions, *and* disorient them, to emphasize the challenges of interpretation. Scholarship often attempts to ‘solve’ dumb shows by giving them an overarching purpose; I argue instead that they are best understood when their constitutive oddness is foregrounded rather than explained away. I conclude with a detailed examination of one particular play, Webster’s *The White Devil*, to assess the interpretive relationship between dumb show and main action, stage direction and dialogue.

### **Making meaning**

Dumb shows could be seen as theatrical punctuation: structuring devices that help an audience understand how one part of the play connects to another. They can work like an ellipsis that yokes together temporally disparate action, or an exclamation mark that highlights a particular

scene as important. Like punctuation, they help manage the timing of the narrative, but this is not necessarily only a matter of letting us know ‘when’ we are, but of putting time and our experience of it in question. Dumb shows are temporally elastic: they can rewind, fast-forward and pause the play’s action. When presenters apologetically introduce a dumb show, their conventional excuse is that this device speeds up the plot. In Fletcher’s and Massinger’s *The Prophetess* (licensed 1622) a dumb show is used for the ‘conveniencie of time’ (1647: 38), while in Gervase Markham’s and William Sampson’s *Herod and Antipater* the form conveys ‘what Words / Cannot haue time to vtter’ (1622: [F4r]). Such reasoning draws on the idea that sight is speedier than sound, and that words risk making action ‘tedious’ (Heywood 1613: I3v). Yet, as Jeremy Lopez points out, ‘dumb shows are almost always inefficient’ (2013: 296). Those dumb shows attended by a presenter frequently involve lots of words: the characters in the mime are silent, but the presenter laboriously explains their actions. Even without extended glosses, dumb shows that cram action into a condensed form, or which sequence a series of significant gestures, take time to show. As alternatives to dialogue exposition they are not particularly quick and, as we shall see, they make greater demands on the actors involved. In fact, narrative dumb shows that are not formally explained are almost always followed by dialogue that reiterates what has just happened, rendering the show itself superfluous in strict plot terms.<sup>2</sup> Thus dumb shows often involve a representational tautology. On occasions when dumb shows provide an allegorical riff on the central narrative, action is totally suspended. A revised version of *Lochrine* (1595) has symbolic dumb shows at the beginning of each act, featuring animals that emblemize the human morals of the main story. This structure reframes the plot’s chronology, so that its moment-to-moment happenings are linked to a universal time-scheme.

But time can also be made urgent and personal through this form. In various dumb shows the passing of time is carefully choreographed. A small child is ‘at last’ seen by the performers of the dumb show in Dekker’s and Middleton’s *Bloody Banquet* (performed 1608) and ‘at last’ taken up by the clown (1639: Dv). These directions elongate the wordless action, and the

absence of dialogue intensifies spectators' frustrated concern about what will happen to the child. Time is experienced differently at such moments. And that is part of the point of dumb shows: not only do they pragmatically steer audiences through action that supposedly cannot fit into the 'two hours' traffic of our stage', but they also emphasize time's quirks, which is rarely experienced in the uniform manner clock-time deceptively promises.

Space can also be reorganized in dumb shows. It is well known that early modern drama was far less concerned with detailing 'realistic' settings than the elaborately scenic theatre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even so, at the level of an individual scene, dialogue provides a degree of fixity and a sense that a person speaking is in a particular place, however loosely defined. Of course, a speaking actor does not necessarily speak in a 'naturalistic' manner, but stripping away speech takes a performance even further away from real life. When an unwanted baby is hidden '*in a Corner*' during a dumb show in *A Mayden-Head Well Lost*, the child is lost to all topographical space, on some literally insignificant part of the Cock-Pit stage (Heywood 1634: [D4v]). Only a scene later, at the beginning of the next act, do we learn through dialogue that the baby was dumped in a 'Groue of Trees' (1634: Ev). For a while, the abandonment is total, lacking even representational markers.

Relieved of such vestiges of 'realism' as speech can create, dumb shows provide especially easy opportunities to reconfigure space. Vast distance is squeezed into the Curtain's stage by the dumb show in *The Travailes of Three English Brothers*. The choric Fame entreats the audience:

But would your apprehensions helpe poore art  
Into three parts deuiding this our stage:  
[The brothers] all at once shall take their leaues of you,  
Thinke this *England*, this *Spaine*, this *Persia*,  
Your fauours then to your obseruant eyes:

Weele shew their fortunes present qualities.

*Enter three severall waies the three Brothers*

(Day 1607: [H4r-v])

The show is partly taking place in the thoughts of spectators, whose imaginations are enlisted to work the special effect. The trick is similar to that performed by the Chorus in *Henry V* when he instructs the audience to ‘Suppose within the Girdle of these Walls / Are now confin’d two mightie Monarchies’ (hr). But dumb shows can choreograph the imagination more precisely. In *The Travailes of Three English Brothers* the dynamics of the dumb show anchor the audience’s thoughts: the triple entrance signifies international distance between the brothers; the flexible mode of the dumb show makes that distance believable.

Multi-door entrances and exits are not unusual in dumb shows. Theatre historians have debated both the number of doors available for stage traffic in various Renaissance playhouses, and the ways they would have been used. Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa claim actors usually enter through one door and exit through another (making additional use of a central opening); whereas David Bradley posits that an actor must enter through the same door that he last used for an exit; and Tim Fitzpatrick suggests doors designate entrances and exits to particular fictional places.<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Tribble persuasively argues that ‘a system organized to reduce cognitive demands’ would support the hypothesis of Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa that generally speaking actors would all use one door for entrances and the other for exits (2005: 143). Early modern players wrestled with a rapidly changing repertory and did not have much time to learn their parts; an entrance/exit practice that did not involve extra learning is professionally sensible. Furthermore, as Tribble argues, the existence of stage directions specifying ‘*Enter character x at one door and character y at another* [...] clearly indicates that this kind of entrance is a departure from the norm and implies that only such movements need be specified’ (2005: 144). These stage directions appear in various places in numerous plays. But it is striking that in the plays listed by

Dessen and Thomson as featuring labelled dumb shows, nearly half of them include dumb show stage directions in this form. While the unusual entrance/exit instruction certainly was not unique to dumb shows, it seems to have been a technique deployed within a significant number of them. And this usage makes semiotic sense. Lacking dialogue, dumb shows make meaning through alternative means: precisely choreographed gestures, symbolically appropriate props, resonant sound effects, and spatially significant entrances and exits. Having characters enter the stage from different doors vividly charges the stage space. Two-door entrances are a good way of creating an agonistic impact, as in the battle dumb show in *The Weakest Goeth to the Wall* (1600: A3r) or in the mute moral face-off between good angels and would-be assassins in *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (Heywood 1605: E3v). Dual entrances also give dynamic emphasis to scenes of union: characters attempting to marry in *A Mayden-Head Well Lost* enter their dumb show from two doors (1634: [F4v]). Similarly, some characters depart ‘one way’ and some ‘another’ to perform the separation of the leave-taking dumb show in Middleton’s *Hengist* (printed as *The Mayor of Quinborough* 1661: Bv-B2r).

But perhaps these atypical entrances and exits had a phenomenological affect as well as a semiotic effect. Which is to say, while the use of multiple doors suggests specific narrative meanings, they might also produce more ambiguous feelings of disorientation in spectators used to seeing entrances from one door and exits at another. I am not suggesting that such disorientation would be particularly pronounced, but rather that the subtle restructuring of stage action could contribute to a dumb show’s representational disruption. The final dumb show in Heywood’s relentlessly spectacular Red Bull play, *The Golden Age* (1611), exploits all possible spatial dimensions in its entrances and exits:

*Sound a dumbe shew. Enter the three fatall sisters, with a rocke, a threed, and a paire of sheeres; bringing in a Gloabe, in which they put three lots. Iupiter drawes heauen: at which Iris **descends** and*

*presents him with his Eagle, Crowne and sceptre, and his thunder  
bolt. Iupiter first **ascends vpon the Eagle, and after him***

**Ganimed.** [...]

*Sound. Neptune drawes the Sea, is mounted vpon a sea-horse, a Roabe  
and Trident, with a crowne are giuen him by the Fates [...]*

*Sound, Thunder and Tempest. **Enter at 4 seuerall corners** the 4  
winds: Neptune riseth disturb'd: the Fates bring the 4 winds in a chaine,  
& present them to Æolus, as their King. [...]*

*Sound. Pluto drawes hell: the Fates put vpon him a burning Roabe,  
and present him with a Mace, and burning crowne.*

([K2v]; my emphasis)

The ascents and descents give the stage a divine axis, but Heywood stretches the space further still with an unusual reference to ‘4 *seuerall corners*’, perhaps implying entrance from the yard as well as the tiring house.<sup>4</sup> The multi-directional movement works together with the environmental props (‘*a Gloabe*’, ‘*heauen*’, ‘*sea*’, and ‘*hell*’) to expand the sense of space. Heywood consolidates the impact of his thrilling spectacle (which includes a ‘*burning crowne*’ and ‘*burning Roabe*’) with entrances from unexpected directions. The dumb show shapes a fairly detailed understanding of the narrative, but it also impacts on the spectators’ physical relationship with the play, and their proximity to its actors, who are brought closer even as they cross supernatural distances.

Dumb shows provide obvious opportunities for dramatists to exploit theatre’s ability to flout the order of time and space. Such subversions are certainly not unique to dumb shows. But there are significant representational differences between shows and the main dramatic action. The two modes of performance had different logistical demands. Lacking dialogue, the actors who perform in them cannot learn their performances from cue-scripts; group rehearsal is a requirement of the dumb show, but not the main action. This different pressure is evident in the



handful of surviving ‘plots’. These documents tabulate entrances, as well as some prop usage and sound effects. Essentially they convey the structure of a play in terms of its stage traffic and have been helpfully described as ‘back-stage’ plots by Tiffany Stern (2009: 201-231): they seem to chart the activity that needs to take place behind the stage. As practical documents, they are efficiently minimal in the amount of information they convey. Therefore the fact that ‘dumb shows’ are labelled in plots for *The Battle of Alcazar*, *The Dead Man’s Fortune* and *2 Seven Deadly Sins* indicates that something different had to happen in them. Indeed, the directions for dumb shows in back-stage plots are atypically full, describing not just a movement on to the stage, but also the gestures and actions that actors needed to perform when they got there (Calore 2003: 255). The provision of extra information reveals the additional challenges dumb shows brought with them.

These different practical demands seem to have been accompanied by different performance strategies too. Critics now recognize that early modern acting styles are likely to have been varied: formal and exaggerated at some moments and ‘naturalistic’ and understated at others (Karim-Cooper 2016: 77-78). But it is nevertheless clear that dumb shows diversified the performance practice within individual plays through their comparatively excessive manner. Without dialogue to express themselves, actors in dumb shows primarily make meaning through physical actions; the various calls for ‘signs’ and ‘passionate action’ invite extravagant gesture (Astington 2010: 20). Indeed ‘dumb show’ and ‘dumb action’ seem to imply a particular performance style. A direction in *Satiromastix* stipulates: ‘*the King is welcom’d, kisses the Bride, and honours the Bride-groome in dumbe shew*’ (Dekker 1602: [D4r]). Arriving at the end of the instruction, ‘dumb show’ functions more like a verb than a label. Similarly, in *A Warning for Faire Women*, within a stage direction already framed as a dumb show, Chastitie enters ‘in dumbe action uttering her griefe’ (1599: G3r). The tautological direction to be ‘dumb’ partly clarifies that the ‘uttering’ is silent, but it also implies that ‘dumbe action’ looks different from other action. Likewise, in *The Duchess of Malfi* (performed 1613), one dumb show is nested within another when, during the course of a show, the Duchess, Antonio and their children ‘*are (by a forme of*

*Banishment in dumbe-shew, expressed towards them by the Cardinall, and the State of Ancona) banished* (Webster 1623: Hv). ‘Dumb show’ is a term that can label both a full sequence and a particular kind of intense performance. Indeed, the metaphorical use of ‘dumb show’ to signify an exceptionally visible (but mute) display of emotions implies that the staged practice involved pronounced gestures and facial expressions. Thus when in *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* Ragan ‘knits her brow, bytes her lips, / And stamps’, she is said to be making ‘a dumbe shew of disdayne, / Mixt with reuenge, and violent extremes’ (1605: Ev). Similarly, Michael Drayton (himself a playwright) uses the image of the dumb show to emphasize Edward II’s vividly emotional response to his deposition:

His faire cheeke couered in pale sheets of shame,  
And as a dumbe shew in a swowne began,  
Where passion dooth such sundry habits frame,  
As euery sence a right Tragedian,  
Truely to shew from whence his sorrow came,  
Beyond the compasse of a common man,  
Where Nature seems a practiser in Art,  
Teaching Dispaire to act a liuely part.

(1605: 102)

However overblown Edward’s ‘dumbe shew’ might seem, Drayton claims that acting is a form of authenticity. He likens the ‘swowne’ to a dumb show because tragic performance allows Edward ‘Truely to shew’ the cause of his sorrow. There is something disingenuous about this reasoning. Edward’s demonstration is deeply embedded in theatricality: ‘Nature *seems* a practiser in Art’. Is it Art or Nature that puts Edward ‘Beyond the compasse of a common man’? Does the dumb show truly make the emotion showy, or is the show true?

## Disrupting meaning

Due to their extravagant performance style, dumb shows raise questions about the legibility of human behaviour. Forms of the word ‘seem’ and ‘seeming’ are, according to Dessen and Thomson, most frequently found in stage directions detailing ‘*dumb shows* and other pantomimed actions’ (1999: 190).<sup>5</sup> Given that ‘seeming’ is a pretty good description of what actors do throughout any performance, the word is redundant in dumb show instructions. Its presence perhaps accentuates the obviously acted quality of dumb actions: an actor does not simply display sadness, but rather *seems* to be sad; spectators notice the ‘seeming’ as well as the ‘sadness’. Christina Luckyj suggests that dumb shows therefore served ‘as a site where women and men alike were exposed as *performers*, dissemblers, hypocrites’ (2002: 100). It is certainly true that hypocrisy or pretence seems particularly pronounced in a dumb show’s exaggerated gestures (indeed, the form makes successful deception plausible since the frame enables the audience to recognize an action as over-the-top that is not legible as such to other characters). But hypocrisy does not dominate extant dumb shows, and the wordless form does a rather better job of exposing the difficulty of judging apparently legible behaviour than it does of defining it as fraud.

Their different performance style from the main action is but one way in which dumb shows create a disruption. Dumb shows change the rules of representation within any given play. As Lopez notes, they ‘require a different form of attention’ from the audience (2013: 294). After all, there is something wilfully awkward about the way dumb shows shift theatrical gears. In narrative shows, language is removed from action that would normally be accompanied by dialogue. Without this obvious medium of meaning, audiences are asked to interpret action using means that usually consolidate language: gesture, movement, non-verbal noise, and even smell. And as the semiotic significance of the actor’s body intensifies, its phenomenological impact also changes. Bert O. States points out that ‘theater – unlike fiction, painting, sculpture, and film – is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that *are* what they seem to

be' (1985: 20). The actor on stage performs the body of a character with an actual body, whereas a painting uses oily marks on canvass and a novel makes do with printed words on the page. Some of the continuity between theatre and reality is broken when the speaking actor/character suddenly withdraws into dumb action. In this respect, dumb shows are importantly different from mute characters: a mute character represents a recognisably real phenomenon; a dumb show takes an extra step away from the real world.

Not surprising then that Gower should describe the actors in the dumb shows he presents in *Pericles* as 'moats and shadowes' (1609: G2v). Acting in dumb show, the players become somehow insubstantial. Some dumb shows exploit this sense of phenomenological change by staging supernatural or visionary action. Introducing the show in *The Devil's Charter*, Guichardine demarcates the representational shift with 'a siluer rod' as he 'mooueth the ayre three times' (Barnes 1607: A2r). The 'vision' that follows explodes with special effects: devils ascend and descend, thunder is cued four times, and 'fearfull fire' and 'sulphurous smoke' assault the audience's senses (A2v). Other supernatural shows draw a boundary between 'real' action and 'visionary' show only to question that same boundary. The dumb show in *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1605) is an effective vehicle for staging a battle between good angels and the Catholics who would assassinate the sleeping Princess Elizabeth. The shifty representational status of the show enables it to drift between allegory, dream and real divine intervention without ever landing on one specific meaning. However, the ideological significance – that Elizabeth is defended by God – is stressed by the material impact that the show has on the main action. Elizabeth awakes to find a prop has been moved: her bible is now open with her finger resting at a verse which glosses what has just happened. The show has pushed into the mimetic action to claim a larger 'truth' about Elizabeth's place in God's universe. A denominationally different show plays with the same boundary in Shakespeare's and Fletcher's *Henry VIII* (performed 1612). Here the audience share the Catholic perspective of the sleeping Queen Katherine, who is visited by '*Personages, clad in white Robes*' (xv) that dance around her and crown

her with a garland. This time the margins of the heavenly show are blurred by the way its music is cued. Stage directions such as ‘Sound a dumb show’ or ‘Music. Dumb show’ imply that shows were conventionally initiated with music. But in *Henry VIII* music is pointedly called for within the main action, when Katherine asks for music to help her sleep. The ‘*Sad and solemne Musicke*’ plays before, during, and after the show (which concludes with a direction clarifying ‘*The Musicke continues*’ (xv)). In this way, the mimetic action never quite gives way to the dumb show: the music is ‘really’ happening, but the figures who dance to it may be figments of Katherine’s imagination or a ‘real’ heavenly visitation. Like other parts of this play, the drama here questions if ‘all is true’. Understanding this dumb show means recognizing the subjective nature of understanding.

However apt the form might be for dreams and visions, B.R. Pearn calculates that only a minority of extant dumb shows represent such content (1935: 393). While dumb shows might lend themselves to clever visionary performance, their function far exceeds this use. Indeed, the relative paucity of illusory or dream-like dumb shows makes it all the more striking that this form nevertheless seems to have been regarded as an especially insubstantial part of what actors (or ‘shadows’) did on stage. Thus in *The Hogge Hath Lost His Pearle*, Wealthy exclaims ‘sfoot is vanisht as sodainly as a dumbe shewe’ (Tailor 1614: E2r). The same simile was used by Robert Cotton, who mocked the idea that ‘Popery will vanish like a dumb shew’ (1641: 24). Lancelot Andrewes indirectly linked dumb shows’ propensity to ‘vanish’ to a sense of their insubstantiality.

Preaching on John 20.13, which describes the angels at the tomb of the resurrected Christ, he explained: ‘It was not a dumb shew, this, a bare apparition, and so vanished away. It was a *visio* & *vox*, a vocall vision’ (1620: 16). Visions that lack words also lack material substance, Andrewes’ logic suggests. While such analogies might imply that staged dumb shows conventionally ended in a sudden disappearance, not many extant stage directions record this specific exit instruction (‘vanish’ is found in *Henry VIII* and the plot of *Seven Deadly Sins*). Instead, the simile perhaps more accurately conveys the aura of ethereality produced by dumb shows; at these moments

actors surrendered the sense of consubstantiality with the audience by pointedly refusing to behave like them.

But, of course, dumb shows are not really dumb. They are always framed by words, whether in the form of expository dialogue or a presenter's explanation.<sup>6</sup> And because dumb shows are not left to signify for themselves, they frame a tension between actions and words. Many commentators regard dumb shows as moments of intensified meaning within a play. Tiffany Stern regards them as highly symbolic, comparing them to emblems in books or impresa on shields (2012a: 275). And certainly allegorical dumb shows foreground the thematic or moral concerns of a play. B.R. Pearn suggests that such shows might have helped 'the audience to understand the arguments and long speeches' of their plays (1935: 392), although this diagnosis rather overlooks the fact that such shows themselves needed explaining. For Dieter Mehl, all forms of dumb shows – the earlier allegorical forms and the later narrative devices – served the same purpose of clarifying the meaning of the play. Dumb shows formed part of playwrights' attempts to 'make everything as clear and impressive as possible' (1965: 12). Such readings rightly highlight the densely significant content of dumb shows. Their interpretive function is evident in their metaphorical use outside the theatre. For example, Thomas Bradshaw described the face or 'countenance' as 'a certain sylent speech and dombe shewe to declare what the minde and bodie are' (1591: E3v); likewise, Richard Barnfield called 'a wanton eie' the 'hearts dumb shew' (1595: E2v). Dumb shows 'say things', however silently.

Nevertheless, just as important as dumb shows' significant content is the fact that they disrupt the process of signification. It is telling that early modern writers sometimes used the phrase 'dumb show' to describe an incomplete or ambiguous sign. Robert Cleaver carefully distinguished between a legal marriage (performed with words) and less binding signs of union: 'if a Contract be a promise, it is not onely a purpose of the heart, nor a dumbe shew, or doubtfull signification of promise: but a plaine promise vttered & pronounced in a right forme of speech' (1598: H3r). Similarly, Arthur Lake, expounding Matthew 3.16 and the appearance of the Holy

Spirit like a dove, explains: ‘A visible signe of it selfe is but a dumbe shew, it may amaze, it cannot instruct, because it must bee illustrated; and it is here illustrated, by an *audible word*, the word is called *Vox de Caelo, a voyce from Heauen*’ (1629: 160). In these texts dumb shows are imperfect signs that need supplementing with words to communicate real meaning. Other writers are much more scathing in their figurative use of the term. The concept of the dumb show is spat out in numerous sectarian tracts critiquing the overly theatrical practice of other faiths. Attacking Irish Catholics, John Rider railed against the ‘va[in]e shewing of Christ his death by such ydle gestures and dumbe shewes [...] in stead of a comfortable declaration of the Lords death, they haue a histrionicall dumbe-shew, without true signification of sence warranted from Christs trueth’ (1602: Lv-L2r). Oliver Omerod made the same complaint against ‘papists’, claiming that they make the mass ‘a dumb shew, which I take to bee the cause, why the people in Italy doo not say to their neybors [...] *Let vs go heare a Masse*, but, *Let vs go see a Masse*’ (1606: 59). Drawing on Calvin, Thomas Morton expanded on this theme, declaring that Catholics ‘make a pompous shew of Ceremonies that are not vnderstood, as if it were some stage-like dumbe shew’ and concluded, ‘can there be a better example of a *Dumbe Ceremonie*; or a more iust reason of *casting it out*, then because it is *dumbe*?’ (1618: 94-5). The critical use of theatrical comparisons is commonplace in anti-Catholic tracts, but it is revealing that dumb shows help to pinpoint a particular fury about ‘histrionicall’ excess and a corresponding lack of understanding. Dumb shows are especially theatrical moments of theatre that produce semiotic malfunction. All show and no substance, they prompt, it is alleged, the kind of mindless gawping so hated by anti-theatricalists. And Catholics as well as Protestants could exploit the term’s hollow significance. One Saint Omer publication dismissed anti-Catholic pamphlets as ‘a dumb-shew of obiections, a wayne terrour of words without strength of reason, without substance of truth’ (S.N. 1622: Mm3r). Paradoxically, these metaphorical dumb shows are made up of words; what makes them dumb shows is their lack of reason and substance.

Of course, the concept of dumb shows is being bent to a propagandist purpose in these tracts, in a discursive context in which theatricality is definitively damnable. But the idea that dumb shows mystify meaning is taken for granted so many times in such texts that it is worth considering the possibility that staged dumb shows do not so much intensify meaning as disrupt it. After all, even onstage viewers admit their bafflement, as when Horatio demands Revenge wakes up and ‘reueale this misterie’ (Kyd 1592: I2v). That such display might confuse seems to be the assumption lying behind the witches’ show in *Macbeth* (performed 1606). Desperate for prophetic reassurance, the newly crowned Macbeth visits the witches. They conjure a series of talking apparitions (an armed head, a bloody child, a child crowned with a tree in his hand) that concludes with a mute ‘Shew’ that is announced three times: ‘*A shew of eight Kings, and Banquo last, with a glasse in his hand*’ (mm6v).<sup>7</sup> Like the visions that preceded it, the show is emphatically symbolic: it is meaning unshackled by narrative. But Macbeth is poorly equipped to interpret such a show effectively. He might rightly read Banquo’s royal lineage, but he wrongly assumes he is being shown a future he can avoid, not a provocation that will cause him to seal that fate. The temporal distortions inherent in the dumb show form fit into the witches’ strategic prophesying. In this play, the disruption of meaning brought by the show is part of the tragic action.<sup>8</sup>

Dumb shows require understanding while simultaneously emphasizing that understanding is challenging. When the presenter of the dumb show in *The Prophetess* promises the audience ‘with such Art the Subject is conveigh’d, / That every Scene and passage shall be cleer / Even to the grossest understander here’ (1647: 38), her tongue might be firmly in cheek. There is, perhaps, a joke on the lack of ‘cleer’ meaning in such shows. The presenter’s concern for ‘understanders’ or groundlings (those who traditionally stood around the stage) hints at their association with this device. Compare Hamlet crediting dumb shows’ popularity with groundlings who might nevertheless find them ‘inexplicable’. Comments like these highlight the heterogeneous quality of audiences; not everyone would respond to plays in the same way. (It is not the case that ‘understanders’ are necessarily less comprehending than their wealthier



counterparts.) But these remarks remind us that dumb shows are especially unpredictable in their impact, and invite a consideration of the kind of understanding they promote.

William West observes that Renaissance writers used the term ‘understanding’ in both a cognitive and a physical sense: people might intellectually grasp a play and/or they might ‘stand’ near it. He argues: ‘for many audiences physical understanding was a sufficient reward for playgoing’ (2006: 124). Certainly, other performances that worked similarly to dumb shows produced diverse responses. Street pageantry, such as the Lord Mayor’s Shows, likewise included highly symbolic devices enacted by silent performers, accompanied by speakers or explanatory placards. But enthusiastic spectators did not necessarily focus their attention on decoding the pageants’ literary meaning. Tracey Hill points out that eyewitness accounts often record the spectacular experience of such events, rather than their complex symbolism. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Venetian Orazio Busino describes Middleton’s 1617 Lord Mayor’s Show without engaging with the symbolic meaning Middleton elaborated in his text (2010: 169). But some English viewers had similar priorities: Henry Machyn’s impressions of the 1553 Lord Mayor’s Show ‘were primarily of colours and noise’ (2010: 130). And Gilbert Dugdale’s misidentification of a figure on one of the ceremonial arches of James’ 1604 royal entry reminds us that interpreting outdoor shows was not always easy (2010: 175). Renaissance spectators were better trained than twenty-first-century viewers at reading iconographic signs. But that does not mean that the pleasures of shows (in the playhouse and in the street) were entirely cerebral or reliably intelligible. In plays, shows offer a break from listening to dialogue and a chance to revel in visual display. Enjoyment can be gained from standing near the show – physically ‘understanding’ it – and figuring out its significance.

Paradoxically, dumb shows are at once hotspots for meaning and moments when intellectual understanding might be suspended. It would be a mistake to think that their purpose is wholly semiotic; that is to say, dumb shows are not only concerned with conveying a meaning that is entirely equivalent to the meaning produced by words. Gesture is accurately thought of as

body language, but its effects are more wide-ranging than that. Indeed, the non-verbal parts of dumb shows show us something that words cannot: the dumbness of the action defamiliarizes it. But, enclosed in wordy frames (whether formally presented or surrounded by dialogue), they also emphasize our reliance on language. In this way, dumb shows are ambivalent moments which offer wordless action both as a form of clarification, and as a means of pointing out the limited quality of all interpretation. There is something epistemologically honest about the way they foreground the strain involved in making sense of things.

### **Understanding *The White Devil***

In the final section of this chapter, I am going to explore the larger impact of dumb shows in one particular play, Webster's *The White Devil* (1612). This tragedy is especially concerned with problems in understanding; it asks, how can you read what you see accurately? These problems may have been too knotty for original viewers. In his address 'To the Reader' in the 1612 quarto, Webster complained that the first production lacked 'a full and vnderstanding Auditory' (A2r). The play itself refuses easy answers to interpretive problems: its 'bad' characters are mitigated by the injustice of their society and 'good' characters are compromised by ideological flaws. Vittoria is adulterous and incites the murder of her husband, but she is also victim of misogynist double-standards; Isabella is painfully pious, but her devotion to her husband tips into image worship. The mistreated devil is counterpointed by an idolatrous saint, and the audience is constantly made to feel the challenge involved in interpretation. Paying attention to the tragedy's stage directions, in particular its dumb shows, reveals a number of shifts in modes of representation. These shifts further entangle the audience in the play's problems with understanding.

The two dumb shows enact the first deaths in the tragedy. In the first show, Isabella is murdered on the commission of her husband, Bracciano:

*Enter suspiciously, Iulio and Christophero, they draw a curtaine*

*wher Brachian's picture is, they put on spectacles of glasse, which  
cover their eyes and noses, and then burne perfumnes afore the picture,  
and wash the lips of the picture, that done, quenching the fire, and  
putting off their spectacles they depart laughing.*

*Enter Isabella in her night-gowne as to bed-ward, with lights after  
her, Count Lodouico, Giouanni, Guid-antonio and others  
waighting on her, shee kneeles downe as to prayers, then drawes  
the curtaine of the picture, doe's three reuerences to it, and kisses it thrice,  
shee faints and will not suffer them to come nere it, dies, sorrow exprest  
in Giouanni and in Count Lodouico, shees conueid out solemnly.*

([D4v])<sup>9</sup>

Featuring death by poisonous picture, this is a show that is especially concerned with looking and visual representation. Multiple frames draw attention to the act of seeing: a 'show' within a play, it stages a picture that is also curtained. And even before the show begins, the audience are cued to question the status and validity of what they see. The dumb show is cast by a conjurer, at the behest of Bracciano, who wants to know if and how the murders he has ordered have taken place. For Dieter Mehl this set-up makes the dumb-show pleasingly organic, since it is integral to the central action (1965: 139). But while the dumb-show is securely linked to the main story in narrative terms, Webster emphasizes its representational ambiguity. Not only is this an illusion produced by a conjurer, that conjurer spends 18 lines reminding the audience that some conjurers 'cheate' and that others infringe supernatural health and safety by calling up spirits: they 'indanger their owne neckes' when intending a mere 'squib' ([D4r]). So before the audience witness the dumb show, they are reminded that it might be a con-trick and, alternatively, that if it is not a con-trick, it might be dangerous precisely because it is real. Aside from the worry about

interpreting what they see, the audience are primed to feel uneasy about the form of the spectacle.

One obvious effect of this spectacle is that it emphasizes Bracciano's cruel detachment from his crimes, as he admiringly watches them played out at a safe distance. But the form also lends a symbolic resonance to the murder. Earlier dumb shows functioned like embodied emblems or allegorical mimes (see, for example, *Gorboduc*). While the Jacobean dumb show in *The White Devil* advances the narrative, its form also lends it an emblematic significance, which speaks as much to the dangers of idolatry, as it does to the villainy of the poisoners. The stage direction associates Isabella's image-use with religious devotion: '*shee kneeles downe as to prayers*'. The narrative context may create sympathy for this abused wife gazing on the picture of her husband, but the show itself could be taken from an anti-Catholic tract mocking papists who get amorously carried away in their image worship. Part of the complexity of this play is to emblemize a sympathetic character in an ideologically dubious way. In watching this show of visual devotion, the audience witness the dangers of images. Furthermore, while the multiple framing devices create a sense of interpretive distance, the audience are nevertheless made physiologically vulnerable to the sensory experience of the show. The poisoners ostentatiously wear spectacles that cover their eyes and noses before burning perfumes, but the audience are directly exposed to the show's sights and smells.

Indeed, both the audience and Bracciano are subsequently forced to take responsibility for what they see. The raucous second dumb show, with its soundtrack of 'louder musicke' ([Dv]) is more physically brutal: Camillo has his neck broken under the cover of a vaulting competition; variously innocent and guilty characters are apprehended for the murder. Bracciano claims not to fully understand this show, and so the Conjuror begins to gloss the actions, only to break off: 'your eye saw the rest, and can informe you / The engine of all' (Er). If the dumb show provides an ambiguous frame that makes Bracciano's uncertainty credible, the Conjuror's

insistence that seeing constitutes enough information forces a kind of interpretive complicity with the murder. Understanding is dangerous and does not necessarily need spoken words.

Some of the dumb show directions are very firmly enmeshed in the preoccupations of the play's dialogue: the 'spectacles' used by Isabella's murderers physically recall the perspective spectacles Flamineo references earlier in the play (B3r-v); and the ritualized kissing links to the kiss Bracciano denied Isabella (Dr), and the later ones forbidden to Giovanni, who is not allowed to kiss his poisoned mother (F3r), and Vittoria, who is warned not to kill the dying Bracciano (Kr). But paying attention to the representational difference between the dumb shows and the dialogue helps to pinpoint the way this tragedy creates uneasiness – an uneasiness that is at the heart of the tragic problem. The two dumb shows are shortly followed by Vittoria's trial (both the shows and the trial are demarcated by subtitles in the quarto). There is a structural counterpoint here: visualized meaning is replaced by a very wordy trial scene, in which anxieties are raised about how language can be used to obfuscate and manipulate meaning. However, we could also see the dumb shows as an interpretive warm up for the trial scene: a way of focusing the audience on key details. After all, when Monticelso takes over the prosecution, he frames his attack in visual terms: instructing his audiences to 'Obserue' and 'see' the villainy in Vittoria (E3r). Firing the lawyer who is comically unable to speak clearly, Monticelso warns Vittoria: 'I shall be playner with you, and paint out / Your folies in more naturall red and white, / Then that vpon your cheeke' (E3r). But Monticelso's 'plain' language is artful. There is scope for a just prosecution here (Vittoria is hardly innocent), but Webster complicates matters by making it a specious (not to mention misogynist) argument. Monticelso damns Vittoria not with evidence but rhetoric: she is a painted whore wearing unnatural colours on her cheek. He not only mounts a flimsy prosecution (she is probably wearing make-up, she is *obviously* a murderer), but he also associates himself with the poisoning painters of the first dumb show: his supposedly plain speech will 'paint out' her follies. The prosecutor's methods are uncomfortably linked with the mode of murder. What matters is not so much that association, as the fact that, moments after

showing the dangers of visual spectacle, Webster goes on to emphasize the unreliability of language: the way it can be used to confuse rather than clarify, and to mislead and manipulate.

As the play progresses, its representational logic keeps shifting. While the dumb shows were questionably supernatural illusions, and the trial scene a more straightforward realism, the terms of representation shift again when Francisco meditates on his dead sister. Trying to remember Isabella's face, Francisco somehow summons up Isabella's Ghost. He identifies this vision as a psychological projection rather than a supernatural apparition: 'how strong / Imagination workes! how she can frame / Things which are not!' (G2r-v). Yet this rational reading of another dumb spectacle is counterbalanced by Flamineo's later encounter with a differently framed ghost. Stage directions detail that Bracciano's ghost appears in '*his leather Cassoc[k] & breeches, bootes, a co[w], a pot of lilly flowers with a scull in*' (L2r). As if this *memento mori* were not emphatic enough, the ghost throws earth at Flamineo and '*shewes him the scull*' (L2r). This time around, the ghost *is* read as supernatural: Flamineo admits, 'This is beyond melancholie' (L2r). The play's fiction cannot settle on what should be taken as real and what as imagined. But even though Flamineo does believe in the ghostliness of this ghost, and understands the message he brings him, the embodied *memento mori* fails to do its job, since Flamineo decides to 'dare' his 'fate' anyway (L2r). This disregard for a sign's meaning encapsulates the play's bleak idea about understanding: maybe it doesn't change anything.

The riddle in the title – *The White Devil* – warns us about the difficulty of interpreting what we see. It is not that this play is particularly meta-theatrical: it does not explicitly ask viewers to be conscious of how theatre makes meaning. Instead, its shifts are subtler – slyer even – than that. The play's disorienting way of asking spectators to read its representations in different terms emphasizes just how total that problem of understanding is. The audience participate in the play's tragic condition. It is a problem of understanding that is produced by the interplay between dialogue and stage directions. Dumb shows are an especially obvious instance of stage directions participating in and complicating the way a play makes meaning. But

exploring the semiotic and phenomenological implications of all forms of stage directions helps illuminate the workings of theatrical representation, and how it enthralls understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare are to the Folio (1623).

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, as shown by Stern above, dumb shows are printed out of place, at a distance from such dialogue.

<sup>3</sup> These positions are summarized by Evelyn Tribble (2005: 143).

<sup>4</sup> Dessen and Thomson note that the direction ‘*Enter four at several corners*’ appears in *No Wit* and ‘*the Devils appear at every corner of the stage*’ in the *Silver Age* (1999: 57).

<sup>5</sup> See also McJannet (1999: 162) and Luckyj (2002: 100-101).

<sup>6</sup> Pearn gauges that only half of extant dumb shows are accompanied by a presenter’s explanation (1935: 386).

<sup>7</sup> Modern editors, including Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason Brown (2014), correct this confusing stage direction: ‘*A show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand; and BANQUO*’ (4.1.110.1-2).

<sup>8</sup> For an alternative reading of *Macbeth*, focusing especially on its violent stage directions, see Hiscock elsewhere in this collection.

<sup>9</sup> See also Dustagheer above for an analysis of the spatial significance of this show.